

# The Flight to Šatrija Hill

## Lithuanian Folk Legends of the Witches' Sabbath

Andrius Kaniava

### *Abstract*

This article examines Lithuanian folk legends concerning the witches' sabbath and its associations with the landscape. Although witch-hunting began later in the Baltic region, Lithuanian folklore shares thematic elements with European traditions, including magical flights, devil worship, and the legend type that features a farmhand as an external observer. A distinctive feature of the Lithuanian legends, however, is their profound connection to the landscape. The site traditionally identified as the location of the witches' sabbath, as depicted in both folk legends and Lithuanian witchcraft trial documents, is Šatrija Hill. Šatrija is a historical site that evolved from an Iron Age hillfort to a legendary place of witches' gatherings. This study analyses 99 folk legends concerning the witches' sabbath from the Lithuanian Folklore Archives. The folklore material is discussed alongside witchcraft trial documents, with a focus on identifying the predominant narratives, geographical locations associated with the sabbath, and the manner in which these folk legends intertwine with the landscape.

**Keywords:** Witches' sabbath, Lithuanian folklore, witchcraft trials, folklore and landscape, Šatrija Hill

Witches are among the most prevalent characters in Lithuanian folklore, and, in contrast to the portrayal of witches in fairy tales, where a witch could be represented either as a benevolent or a malevolent character (Racēnaitė 2022), in folk legends witches are invariably depicted as evil beings that inflict harm upon people. In these narratives, the folkloric witch is capable of casting spells on people, causing illness to villagers or their livestock, transforming people into animals, and stealing the milk from cows. Moreover, witches are sometimes believed to act in more hei-

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nous ways, including killing people and making them insane, or even consuming the blood of infants (Vėlius 1977). According to folk beliefs, witches are closely associated with the Devil, either working together with him or as his subordinates. Compared to folk legends that concern other mythological beings, stories about witches are more frequently categorized as memorates, a term coined by C. W. von Sydow (1934) and describing a type of folk narrative that is presented as derived from personal experience.

The *demonic witch*, a character constructed by demonologists during the witch-hunt period in early modern Europe, had a strong influence on later vernacular beliefs concerning witches. Folk legends about the burning and drowning of witches bear a striking resemblance to actual historical events from the witch trial period, which ran in Lithuania from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, with the last recorded witch trial in 1776 being substantially later than in most other parts of Europe. However, scholars from Lithuania and Latvia posit that the character of the witch in Baltic folklore still retained some of its pre-Christian attributes, which were closely connected with pre-Christian religion, knowledge and helping people instead of harming them. Most folklorists who wrote about witches agree that the concept of the witch (*ragana*) as a deity underwent a shift in meaning after Christianization (cf. Vėlius 1977; Beresnevičius & Čaplinskas 2001; Laime 2024).

Among the numerous features of the folkloric witch, one important and yet under-explored aspect in Lithuanian folkloristics is the interconnection between witches and the landscape. In folklore studies, placelore adopts the so-called “modern” approach to landscape, which posits that landscape functions as an active entity that captures and transforms meaning. This approach asserts that landscapes primarily exist in the human mind as feelings, meanings, and ideas (Darvill 2005; Mulk & Bayliss-Smith 2005; Racėnaitė 2012). This is where the concept of mental landscape comes to the forefront. The idea of mental landscape is understood through the study of placelore, place names and people’s stories, rather than focusing on physical or geographical aspects of places. In this approach, meaning of a place is perceived as flexible and always changing, while such places form a *storied world* that is based on phenomenological understanding of place (cf. Jackson 1996; Ingold 2011). This flexible, ever-changing conception of place is also evident in contemporary placelore research (Valk & Sävborg 2018:7–8). Folk legends and placelore in general become a very important instrument in researching mental landscapes and storied worlds.

The witch, as a mythological and folkloric character, plays a significant role in the placelore of various landscape types in Lithuania. According to Vyktinas Vaitkevičius, the researcher of pre-Christian sacred sites and

Lithuanian placelore, there are numerous locations across the country called *Ragankalnai* (Witches' Hills) and *Mergakalnai* (Maidens' Hills), which are often associated with various witches' activities. Mythological stones and old trees are linked to witches, either by being called "the seat of the witch", or by being connected with their festivities in folk legends. Swamps, marshes and hollows are also often associated with witches and devils, being identified as their dwelling place (Vaitkevičius 2003; Vaitkevičius 2004). A particularly noteworthy group of sites in Northern Lithuania are called *Raganinės* – these are the deep parts of a river, where there was a traditional custom of bathing in the river during certain calendar festivals (Vaitkevičius 2002). However, the most salient aspect related to the landscape is the folk legend type of the witches' sabbath. According to these legends, witches from all across Lithuania convene annually in a specific location for an assembly that includes festivities, dancing and meeting their leader, who is often portrayed as the Devil. These narratives sometimes feature an outside individual – a farmhand, a servant, a neighbour, or a family member – who observes the witch's magical practices and is subsequently transported to the meeting place together with the witch. This is a widely known folk legend motif that was recorded in different parts of Lithuania. The folk legend type concerning the witches' sabbath is a prominent narrative of many European countries' folklore as well. In these narratives, one single location is usually referenced more frequently than others, thereby becoming the designated place for these meetings. Notably, while locations such as *Blåkulla* in Sweden or *Lysa Góra* in Slavic countries are predominantly mythical, having multiple real-life counterparts and possible locations, Lithuanian witch legends are typically localized at a specific place, namely Šatrija Hill in Northern Lithuania. Šatrija, a medieval hillfort, was inhabited by Baltic tribes until the thirteenth century. As early as the seventeenth century, it acquired a new meaning and came to be known throughout Lithuania as the primary location for witches' meetings.

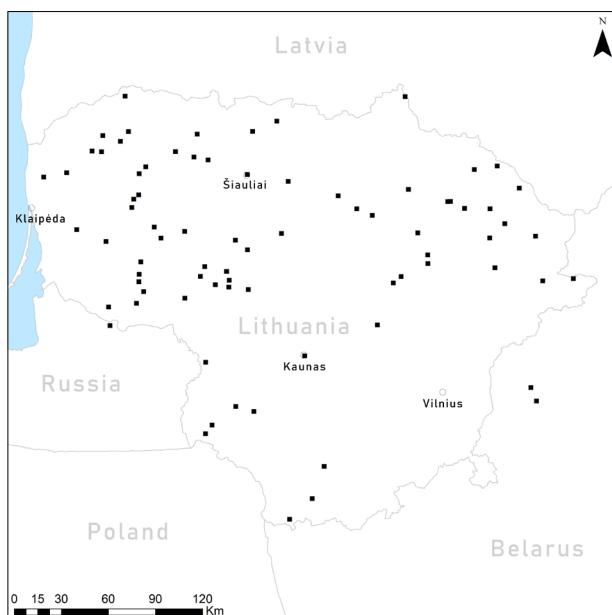
This article suggests that the witches' sabbath folk legend type exemplifies a profound interconnection between folklore and landscape. In the Lithuanian context, Šatrija Hill in western Lithuania holds a distinctive significance. In this article I intend: (1) to identify the main features of Lithuanian Folk legends about the witches' Sabbath, including its main motifs, geographical distribution, and European context; (2) to present Šatrija hillfort, and how its significance was reshaped in modern times, becoming a widely recognized location of the witches' sabbath in Lithuanian folklore; (3) to further contextualize this topic with the broader landscape of witches' meetings in Lithuania, including the context from Lithuanian witchcraft court case files.

## Lithuanian Folk Legends about the Witches' Sabbath

The concept of the witches' sabbath, while recognized earlier as well, was properly established by Western European demonologists in the sixteenth century (Goodare 2016:73–76). According to the Latvian ethnologist Sandis Laime, the witches' sabbath is a component of the *demonic witch* folkloric character, which was significantly influenced by the church (Laime 2024). This type of witch is depicted in folk legends and folk tales as the servant of the Devil. Folk legends about the witches' sabbath constitute a significant portion of Lithuanian witchcraft folklore. For the purpose of this study, I analysed 99 archival folkloric texts, the majority of which remain unpublished.

The earliest documented legends were recorded in the first half of the nineteenth century, mostly in the northern parts of Lithuania, particularly in the Žemaitija region in the west, where witchcraft trials were most prevalent during the early modern period (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of locations where folk legends concerning witches' sabbath were recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Map: Author.



Lithuanian folk legends about the witches' sabbath can be distinguished into two main groups. The first group, comprising 29 folk legends, encompasses general observations made by the storytellers regarding witches and their meetings, with no specific plot. The second and more significant group of folk legends consists of 70 texts that revolve around a narrative about an individual observing a witch obtaining magical flying abilities and coming together with her to the place of the sabbath. This

particular folkloric narrative is also the most pertinent one in folk legends about the witches' sabbath in other countries (Jauhainen 1998:179–181; Klintberg 2010:275–283; Laime 2024:304–312). Folk legends in both groups contain information on how the phenomenon of witches' sabbath was conceptualized in folklore.

Around St. John's Day on Šatrija Hill, once a year there is a gathering of witches and sorcerers. Witches from all over Lithuania and Poland gather on the hill. When they are all gathered, the chief warlock comes either from Rīga or from Mitava. The witches tell him about their deeds. When they fly to the mountain, they do such on all sorts of things: a beehive, a broom, a stick. Only they cannot fly on one with a burnt end, because their ass gets hot. When they fly, a strong wind comes, a whirlwind, and the weather gets worse, so that the witches cannot be seen (LTR 2413/107).

The folk legend quoted above comprises numerous elements that are prevalent in folklore concerning the witches' sabbath. First of all, time and place. According to the examined legends, hilltops are the most popular type of place for the witches' gathering, mentioned in 55 of the analysed texts. Of these hills, Šatrija Hill in western Lithuania merits particular attention, identified as the site of these gatherings on 49 occasions. Another notable location for the sabbath is the city of Kyiv in Ukraine, mentioned nine times. Subsequent sections of this article will delve into specifics of both Šatrija and Kyiv, as well as other potential locations for witches' meetings. For now, I would note that these places are supposed to be “dreadful, remote places, most often bogs” (LTR 2989/415), though other landscape objects such as hills, woods, lakesides, fields, and meadows have been also mentioned. The remoteness of such place is not always specified, but often implied. For example, according to some legends, an uninvited person arrives at the site of the sabbath and in the morning he is often left alone and spends several years attempting to return home (LTR 368/322; 397/89; 783/467, among others).

The aforementioned text includes a detail regarding the timing of the sabbath as well, which is Saint John's Day, or the summer solstice. In the context of Lithuanian folklore, the summer solstice is the prime time for anything related to magical practices. According to folklore, “witches and sorcerers can do much harm to common people, especially during Saint John's Day” (LTR 2560/400). Consequently, the summer solstice is frequently regarded as the time of the witches' sabbath, as evidenced by 24 archival texts. It is interesting that in Latvia, Saint John's Day is frequently mentioned as the time of the witches' sabbath in witch trial records, but not in folk legends (Laime 2024:148).

The meeting itself is often described as a huge celebration or a ball,

with “music and dancing” (LTR 5038/5), as a place where “witches and sorcerers were dancing and having fun all night” (LTR 1678/14) and so on. According to certain legends, during the sabbath, witches engage in horrific and even macabre activities, including the eating of dead horses (LTR 1167/15) and even human corpses (LTR 2069/64; 2989/422). One such legend describes the event as a “Devil’s wedding” (LTR 1514/27), while other texts depict witches dancing and feasting with devils (LTR 344/725; 1418/550; 1514/27 and others). Notably, the role of the Devil as the leader of witches is a recurring theme. The Devil is often portrayed as an old man with a long beard (LTR 494/38). Witches have to bow before this man (LTR 1833/1150), or collect berries for him (LTR 2171/26), and they must also report to him on their malevolent actions (LTR 2413/107). Sometimes the leader of the witches is very clearly identified as the Devil, even called Lucifer (LTR 1418/551), or a “Little German” (LTR 2812/89a), which is a common portrayal of the Devil in Lithuanian folklore (Vėliūs 1987). A particularly vivid example of the commander of the witches dealing with his subordinates is worth quoting:

Once a soldier spent a night at a farm. In the evening, when everyone went to bed, the soldier saw the mistress of the house taking some ointment, putting it on her armpits, turning around a few times, and flying out through the chimney. What kind of sorcery is this? Then the soldier took the ointment and put some of it on the pestle. The pestle moved a bit, then turned a few times and flew out through the chimney. Then the soldier put some ointment on the calf, and the calf vanished as well. Now was the time to try the ointment for himself. As soon as the soldier anointed himself, he too flew through the chimney and after a brief moment appeared on top of Šatrija Hill. Several hundred witches were gathered there. The soldier spotted his mistress among the others, the pestle and the calf were also there, so he stood beside them. Suddenly, two gentlemen appeared and started walking among the witches, praising the ones who worked well, and punishing those who didn’t. Lastly, the gentlemen came to the mistress and asked who the soldier was and why he had come to the hill. The mistress didn’t know what to say and remained silent. One of the gentlemen then put a collar around her neck and started beating her with some wire tool, so hard that her flesh started coming loose. After the procedure, both gentlemen and all the witches disappeared, and only the soldier, pestle, and calf were left on the hill (VUBR F1-F646, pp. 242-243).

This legend provides a comprehensive account of the events that occurred at the witches’ sabbath, while also introducing a recurring folkloric theme from Lithuanian witch legends. This typically involves a male bystander, living at the same house as the witch (usually a farmhand or a servant). This individual witnesses a witch (his female mistress, the wife of the landlord, etc.) making a magical substance that enables her to fly or even teleport herself to the place of the sabbath. The most frequently referenced substance in folktales is an ointment or

mash, mentioned in 25 instances. Rye and buckwheat play a significant role in its preparation. In the majority of these legends, the witch applies the substance to her armpits, nose, ears, or eyes and then vanishes, either through the chimney or the window, or simply vanishes into the air.

The most common means of transportation that witches use to get to the sabbath are a broom (8 legends), a beehive (6 legends), also a mortar and pestle, a sauna whisk, and a tree trunk are mentioned.

The narrative typically continues with the farmhand (or a servant, a child) mimicking the actions of a witch by applying the same magical substance to himself, which transports him to the place of the witches' sabbath. In the majority of the folk legends examined in my research, the farmhand ties himself to a heavy object (usually a big pestle), but this doesn't prevent him from arriving at the witches' meeting place. In certain instances, he collides with the chimney, roof, or treetops during his flight. At the meeting, the servant recognizes his female mistress among the other witches, and she often warns him to not speak about this to anyone. This folk legend type exhibits a range of variations of its finale. The most prevalent one involves the servant inscribing or uttering some religious Christian phrase, which culminates in the disappearance of the entire sabbath event:

Some force took him to Šatrija Hill. There he saw his mistress Daubrienė with a girl among the other guests. Daubrienė told him that now he had to join the sorcerers' society, and the farmhand agreed. But instead of the Devil's name, he wrote down the name of Jesus Christ in the book. Immediately the palace collapsed, the witches and sorcerers disappeared, and only the farmhand with the book remained (LTR 2273/2).

In folk legends, Christian symbols and practices, such as crosses, holy water, prayers, and a recitation of names from the Bible, including Jesus Christ and other biblical figures, are often employed as a way to ward off malevolent entities, including devils, witches, or sorcerers. Two additional texts about the witches' sabbath include a similar narrative to the one quoted above, where the servant is instructed to inscribe his name in a book and pledge his allegiance to the devil. However, he decides to put a holy name instead and everything disappears. Other examples include phrases such as "for the love of God" (Basanavičius 1997:369), "oh, Holy Virgin" (LTR 4056/36) and similar expressions. Another, more severe conclusion to this narrative involves the punishment of witches upon their return home. The following day, the man who witnessed the sabbath informs his lord, who subsequently beats his wife (LTR 865/135; 1426/4), throws her out of the house (LTR 935/11), or even executes her. The latter conclusion of the legend resembles witch trials, which frequently includ-

ed the burning of the accused witches (LTR 898/122; 1172/5; 1678/14).

Most of the Lithuanian folk legend types examined in this study bear notable similarities, albeit with distinctive details, to legends from Scandinavian and Baltic countries (cf. Christiansen 1958; Jauhiainen 1998; Klintberg 2010; Laime 2024). Lithuanian folk legends about the witches' sabbath fall under the two migratory tale variants distinguished by Reidar Th. Christiansen: variant 3045 ("Following the Witch") and variant 3050 ("Witches' Sabbath"). The latter, according to Christiansen, is generally told as personal experiences rather than epic legends (Christiansen 1958:48). In other words, these texts should be comprehended as memorates.

According to Lauri Honko, "through them [memorates] we grasp the living essence of folk belief, the supernatural experiences of the people. Belief in the existence of spirits is founded not upon loose speculation, but upon concrete, personal experiences, the reality of which is reinforced by sensory perceptions" (Hakamies & Honko 2013:139). The fact that the majority of folk texts regarding the witches sabbath are presented as memorates shows how these narratives are manifested in folk belief. This representation of witchcraft and, more broadly, magical folklore can be traced back to the processes of the early modern period, particularly witch-hunting, which significantly influenced the perception of witches and carried this perception to modern-day folklore. The influence of witch-hunting on witch-related folklore necessitates a brief discussion of witchcraft case trials as an additional context for the case of the witches' sabbath.

## Witchcraft Court Cases

Witch-hunting and its trials in eastern Europe emerged later than in other regions on the continent, during the sixteenth century, and persisted throughout the eighteenth century. The earliest documented instance of a witch trial in Lithuania dates to 1552. However, historians argue that similar phenomena must have happened earlier as well, even before the Reformation (Jablonskis & Jasas 1987; Jasas & Vėlius 2001). From 1569 to 1795 the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was in the federative union with the Kingdom of Poland, thus forming the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In contrast to Poland, however, where the Inquisition had been active since the thirteenth century, there was no established Inquisition in Lithuania. This fact, coupled with lack of involvement from the Church in investigating and convicting witches, resulted in a scenario where all witch trials until the eighteenth century landed in the hands of secular courts. These courts included castle courts for cases where the accusant

was from the nobility, peasants' cooperative courts for villagers, and estate courts handled the trials for the serfs (Zujienė 2015). It was not until the early eighteenth century that the church and state began to regulate witch trials. However, smaller local courts, operating under the influence of estate lords, continued to accuse people of witchcraft until 1776, when the higher authority court in Warsaw finally forbade the persecution of individuals for witchcraft and sorcery in Poland and Lithuania (Beresnevičius & Čaplinksas 2001:571; Zujienė 2015:95).

Witch trial documents in Lithuania remain an under-researched area, with a significant portion of trial records and associated documents either lost or still undiscovered (Ragauskas 2019:211). However, it is important to note that the scale of witch trials in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was significantly smaller than those in Central Europe. A study of the trial records reveals that approximately 400 individuals were accused of witchcraft during the time of the witch trials, of which only 20 per cent received a death sentence and another 14 per cent were completely acquitted (Zujienė 2015). During these trials, both men and women were accused of using magic to cause harm to others in various ways or of desecrating holy artefacts. Because the trials were left to the jurisdiction of secular courts, the accusation of a person often became a way to deal with personal issues and enemies. The majority of witch trials were initiated by noblemen or even by the villagers being the accusants, while the church and its clergy were not involved in the process.

A notable aspect of the witchcraft trial case files is the incorporation of folkloric motives from folk legends into the confessions of alleged witches and sorcerers. This phenomenon has been observed in other countries as well, where folk narratives and practices that were prohibited by the church intertwined together in the testimonies and confessions during these trials (cf. Klintberg 2010; Laime 2024). A significant number of defendants, often subjected to torture, not only admitted to using spells or incantations to cause harm, but also claimed to have been taught by the Devil and to have worked for him. This narrative of alleged witches collaborating with the Devil became more prevalent in eighteenth-century trials (Zujienė 2015).

Given the relatively late conclusion of witch trials in Lithuania, we can see narratives from the same folk legend types that were recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries being employed as accusations, testimonies, or, most frequently, as confessions in the trials. This phenomenon demonstrates not only the influence of early modern demonology to subsequent folkloric motifs, but also suggests that certain characteristics of the folkloric witch may have originated from the witch as a pre-Christian mythological being. According to the Lithuanian folklorist Norbertas Vė-

lius, the documents of Lithuanian witch trials reveal how folklore, Christian beliefs, and remnants of pre-Christian mythology are mixed with the European view of witches, as well as with popular literature of the time, such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Jasas & Vėlius 2003:429). Vėlius, as well as other scholars specializing in Lithuanian mythology, posits that the depiction of the witch in these trial documents includes many features of the pre-Christian priest or even a goddess *Ragana*, encompassing remnants of practices, incantations, etc. This perspective is further concluded by Goodare, who, after comparing witch-hunt trial testimonies from different European countries, argues that certain concepts pertaining to the witches' sabbath have been assimilated by demonologists from folklore (Goodare 2016:137).

Naturally, participation in the witches' sabbath became one of the most prominent crimes that alleged witches confessed to. Vėlius argues that this narrative was more influenced by the literature and modern popular beliefs about witches than by the witch as a mythological being (Jasas & Vėlius 2003). Similar observations have been made by European researchers as well; for example, Goodare states, while speaking about the development of the witch-hunt ideology in the late sixteenth century, that

The debate about witches' flight fed into the next phase of demonological development, in which the focus was on the witches' sabbat. This made sense, since flying witches were clearly going somewhere. Their destination, it could now be seen, was the place where they gathered to worship the Devil, so it was important to establish more about this (Goodare 2016:73).

The Lithuanian historian Aivas Ragauskas conducted research on sixteen witch trial cases from 1641–1746, in which the phenomenon of flying witches was documented (Ragauskas 2019). According to this research, confessions often incorporated elements and narratives from folk legends, with people stating that they were flying to meet their superior (often identified as the Devil) at a specific place (such as Šatrija Hill, among others). Some of these confessions described shapeshifting into crows and other animals. Furthermore, some defendants confessed to using magic ointment, which they rubbed on their armpits in order to be transported to the witches' meeting place. Compared to folk legends recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, witch trials often depict the sabbath in a more detailed way, describing the Devil, feasting, drinking and orgies that allegedly happened on the hill.

Locations cited in the trial documents as places of the witches' sabbath include various swamps, hills, and an old oak. Notably, just as in folk legends, Šatrija Hill emerged as the most prevalent destination described by the accused witches. Šatrija Hill was mentioned in a broad region, ac-

cording to Ragauskas' study its documented mentions extending up to 64 kilometres away from the hill (Ragauskas 2019:244-246). Ragauskas's research indicates that Šatrija Hill was identified as the place of the witches sabbath as early as 1696. The study also indicates that, although witch trials were held throughout Lithuania, the majority of the cases involving the witches' sabbath were from the western region of the country.

## Šatrija Hill

As Lauri Honko has posited, the elements of migratory legends tend to be localized in different settings. This phenomenon is especially evident in the context of historical legends and placelore. For instance, globally known narratives concerning the creation of stones, hills, streams, or lakes must be linked to local landscape features in order to become a part of local tradition. There is a good reason why local legends are often associated with distinctive features of the environment, or can simply catch a person's eye – Honko calls it "milieu dominance" (Hakamies & Honko 2013:173–188). This is very well demonstrated by the legends about the witches' sabbath, which in different countries or regions are always localized at different sites that often are distinguished in the landscape. As previously demonstrated, Šatrija Hill is by far the most prevalent location for the witches' sabbath in Lithuania, as evidenced by its presence in both folklore and witch trial records. In contrast, in Latvia, where the folk legend type of the witches' sabbath has more different variants and features than in Lithuania, the precise location of the sabbath is seldom specified. The only location mentioned repeatedly is *Zilais kalns* (Blue Hill), an undisclosed mythical site that has no connection with the actual landscape (Laime 2024:148). The Latvian *Zilais kalns* resembles folk tradition in Sweden, where the primary location for the witches' sabbath is *Blåkulla*, which also means "Blue Hill". According to Klintberg, *Blåkulla* is above all a mythical place, despite a small number of locations in Sweden being identified as *Blåkulla* in folk legends (Klintberg 2010:275). In Poland, Ukraine, and other Slavic countries, the place of the sabbath is often called *Lysa Góra*, the "Bald Mountain" (Levack 2016). Conversely, Lithuanian Šatrija Hill is more similar to such places as Heuberg in Germany or Domen in Norway, which are real landscape objects that were identified as the main place for the witches' sabbath in folklore (Goodare 2016:136).

The word *šatrija* in the Lithuanian language translates to "angry, crazy woman who is hard to live with". The examples of the historic usage of such word are limited to western Lithuania (LKŽ: šatrija). As previously



Figure 2. Šatrija Hill, facing from the south. Photo: Author.

discussed, the name Šatrija Hill was recorded in witchcraft court cases beginning in 1696, suggesting that the name likely was much older. This historical and cultural association with witchcraft made the name of the hill into a common word for a witch-like woman. Also, in folk legends, the name of Šatrija Hill is often thought to have originated from the word *šatra*, defined as “long and thin wooden pole or a branch” (LKŽ: *šatra*), sometimes used for hitting another person as a physical punishment. In one particular legend, a farmhand, upon arriving at the hill and seeing the sabbath, beats all the witches with a broom (LTR 4727/151).

The Šatrija in question, today better known in Lithuania simply as “Šatrija Hill” (Šatrijos kalnas) in Telšiai County, was historically a hillfort of Žemaitija,<sup>9</sup> featuring a wooden castle on top and an Iron Age settlement encircling the hill. According to archaeologists who have conducted excavations at Šatrija and its environs, the earliest artefacts found at the hillfort are dated to the second to fourth century CE, with the latest ones from the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries (Valatkienė 1986; Karalienė 2010; Daubaras 2013). The majority of the archaeological findings are typical of Iron Age hillfort settlements in Lithuania, including iron tools, brass jewellery (bracelets, brooches, chains), and ceramics. Excavations at Šatrija were infrequent, primarily conducted in areas of future pathways and stairs, and we still lack a comprehensive understanding of Šatrija hillfort in pre-Christian times. A very broad chronological timeline, spanning over one thousand years, offers limited insight into the site’s actual prehistoric development. However, the fact that Šatrija was a hillfort indicates the first stage of its development as a significant element in the landscape.

In addition to its territorial significance, Šatrija Hill is believed to be

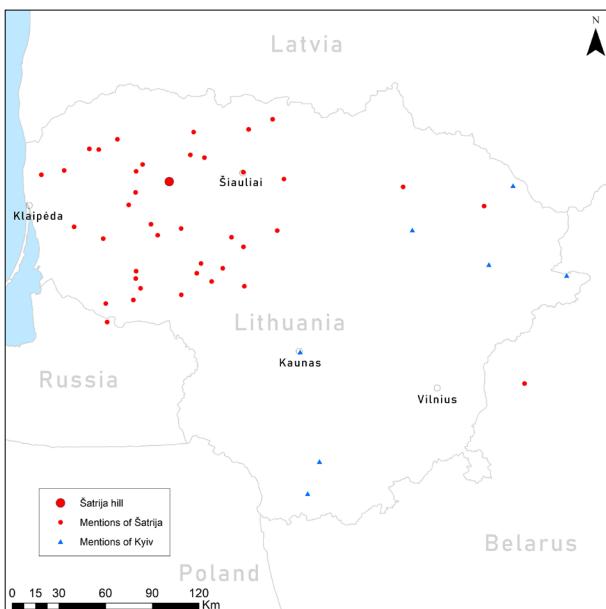


Figure 3. Map of locations where folk legends concerning Šatrija Hill and Kyiv were recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.  
Map: Author.

one of the most important pre-Christian sacred sites in Žemaitija (Vaitkevičius 1998:324–328). This claim is often backed by contextual data, including subsequent historical events and nineteenth–twentieth-century folklore. The Christianization of Žemaitija occurred relatively late, at least by European standards, in 1413. One of the earliest Christian churches in Žemaitija was built in the small town of Luokė, a town near Šatrija Hill, around 1421, commissioned by Vytautas Magnus, the Grand Duke of Lithuania (Vaitkevičius 1998: 327). Even more, the very first bishop of Žemaitija resided in Luokė, although it was not the administrative Catholic centre of the region (Valančius 1972:57). During the early stages of Christianization, churches were often built near or even on top of the sacred sites of the pre-Christian religion. This suggests that the town of Luokė and Šatrija Hill were significant components of both Žemaitija's land structure and its sacred landscape.

The significance of Šatrija is further reinforced by folklore tradition. I have already presented all the main narratives about witches and how the sabbath in these legends often takes place at Šatrija Hill. The mapping of those legends pertaining to the witches' sabbath reveals that the majority of these narratives are located in western Lithuania, spanning a wide area. The distance from the village where the legend was recorded to Šatrija Hill is often considerable, in some cases even more than 100 kilometres (Figure 3). However, the folklore of Šatrija Hill is not limited to legends about witches. In the field of Lithuanian placelore, folk legends concerning giants has a particular significance: "The giant lived by the mountain

and went to Luokė for his mother's funeral. As he walked, his boots filled with soil and he emptied them: one at Girnikai, and the other one near Luokė, which became Šatrija Hill. When he came back, he sat down and wept for so long that he left the lake of Bulėnai there" (LŽV: Girnikai).

Short aetiological legends such as this one, which often explain the origins of various landscape features and how they were created by the giants, are a common feature of Lithuanian folklore. According to another folk legend, recorded in 1938, Šatrija Hill originated as a grave mound for the deceased wife of a giant named Alcis (LTR 1832/312). The same story was also published in 1837 (Jučevičius 1959:566). Other variants concerning giants and Šatrija Hill include the following: one in which a giant, carrying a hat full of soil, is frightened by dogs barking at him, and drops the soil, thus forming a hill (Spudytė 1993:17); and another in which mice are gnawing at a giant's pockets full of soil (Andriusevičius 1970:247). In Lithuanian folklore, giants are often associated with the shaping of the landscape, and the majority of folk legends concerning giants pertain to the creation of hills, lakes, or rivers (Kerbelytė 1970; 2019).

Another notable folk legend type in Lithuanian folklore, often indicating the significance of a place, is about the church inside the hill: "In the old days people told the tale of a church built on top of Šatrija. That church belonged to the Swedes and it went underground. Consequently, on the top of Šatrija Hill nowadays one can see a slight dent" (LTR 1058/179). According to legends, there is a hole on top of Šatrija Hill, through which one can access the church (LMD I 667/1) or hear its bell ringing (LTR 6414/26). Folk legends concerning sunken churches, manors, and even entire towns are common in Lithuanian folklore. These legends typically recount the genesis of a significant landscape object, such as a hillfort, a burial mound, or a lake (Kerbelytė 1970:140–166). The burial of the building is often associated with a religious confrontation (e.g., Christian churches sunken by pagan gods), historical events (e.g., the covering of churches, manors, or castles with soil by the Swedes, as evidenced in the case of Šatrija), or human disobedience to God and subsequent punishment. In folk legends about Šatrija the circumstances of the church disappearing underground are often left unspecified, as is often the case with placelore. However, the fact that this type of folk legend was associated with the hill points to its significance.

I would also like to discuss one more type of folk legend, which is about an entity believed to reside within the hill of Šatrija. According to these legends, the guardian of a treasure is said to reside inside the hill, warning people not to dig there (Spudytė 1994:24). Alternatively, in one legend a child of a local farmer encounters "little devils" who live inside Šatrija (Andriusevičius 1970:248; Spudytė 1994:22). Two folk legends,

in particular, have garnered significant interest. Those are the stories about a person entering the hill and meeting a girl inside:

A man named Pašakarnis from Kirkliai was ploughing on the hill of Luokė (Šatrija). He let his horse free for a while and fell asleep. In a dream he saw a maiden asking him to meet her at midnight. In the middle of the night he came to the hill, saw a terrible giant toad coming out, and ran away. As he ran, he heard coins pouring inside the mountain. The maiden then said: I am unhappy that I had to stay here for a hundred years. But after that I will come out together with my child and we will fight all of Russia together (LTR 776/33a).

This text, together with a similar one about a girl inside Šatrija (LTR 783/600), employs a romantic and patriotic narrative. Such legends were particularly common during the period 1918–1939, a time when Lithuania regained independence, and folklore was profoundly influenced by romanticism. In the example above, a man encounters a girl, who, one may assume, represents the country of Lithuania, a nation that had been “sleeping” for hundreds of years and now, following its independence, will strike back against its occupiers. This folk legend resembles another important folk legend type, the one about an army sleeping inside the hill, awaiting the moment they are needed in battle to defend the country (Kerbelytė 1970:166–170). The fact that Šatrija Hill is the subject of such legends demonstrates that in the early twentieth century it was perceived not only as a “witches’ hill”, but also as a focal point of Lithuanian national identity.

## Kyiv and Other Locations

In this final section of my article, I would like to address a few other locations identified in folk legends and witchcraft case files as the sites for witches’ sabbath. Before discussing some notable individual cases, it is imperative to acknowledge the city of Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. In the first half of the fourteenth century, Kyiv and its surrounding regions were incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, after the conquests of Grand Duke Gediminas and later his son Algirdas. Kyiv remained part of Lithuania and later a part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth until the middle of the seventeenth century, when it was occupied by Russia. These historic ties with Kyiv, along with Kyiv’s religious status as one of the main Orthodox cities, most likely influenced its perception in Lithuanian culture, as well as folklore.

The representation of Kyiv in Lithuanian folklore remains a subject that requires further research. However, there is evidence to suggest that it was

regarded as the foremost foreign city associated with magic, akin to the role played by Wittenberg in the folklore of Central and Northern Europe. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Wittenberg was depicted as the hub of magic teaching, at first by being associated with Faust and the subsequent German grimoire tradition, while later Wittenberg was often identified as the place where the alleged lost *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* are kept (Davies 2009:119). Wittenberg's prominence as the place for sorcerers' training in magic is also notable in Norwegian folklore, as well as in the printed grimoires (Ohrvik 2021:120–122). A brief review of broader Lithuanian folklore related to witchcraft and sorcery reveals that Kyiv plays a similar role in Lithuanian folk legends. According to these legends, sorcerers are believed to study at a magic school in Kyiv, and witches and sorcerers are sometimes identified as coming to Lithuania from Kyiv. Some folk legends feature a segment in which the protagonist travels to Kyiv in order either to perform a magical task or to meet someone who knows magic. Finally, according to the research conducted in preparation for this article, no other foreign city is mentioned even once as the place for the witches' sabbath, only Kyiv. Kyiv as the site of the witches' sabbath is frequently mentioned in the folklore of Ukraine, Poland, and other Slavic countries (Kerbelytė 2011:260).

In Lithuanian folk legends, Kyiv is mentioned as a site of the sabbath nine times. In contrast to Šatrija, Kyiv is mentioned in the eastern and southern regions of Lithuania, and not at all in Žemaitija (Figure 2). It is uncertain whether the people in Lithuanian villages who told these legends knew the actual geographical location of Kyiv, or if the city simply became part of the witchcraft folklore tradition. However, they often conveyed the impression of it being a distant land where witches meet: "A place far from Lithuania" (Basanavičius 2003:260); "In the old days, witches flew through the chimney even to the city of Kyiv" (LMD I 660/122); and similar texts. According to one witches' sabbath legend, Kyiv is "the capital of witches and sorcerers" (LTR 374d/2354).

A comprehensive analysis of 99 folk legends revealed that 49 of these texts make reference to Šatrija Hill, while 9 identify Kyiv as the place for the sabbath. The remaining legends describe witches gathering at various unspecified locations, including hills, fields, swamps, lakesides, and riversides. Only in five instances are specific locations mentioned, and just one of these (Skaistakalnis Hill in Panevėžys) can be identified today. This situation further underscores the significance of Šatrija Hill as a focal point for these narratives. As for witchcraft trial cases, the locations mentioned outside Šatrija are all approximate, including a pond in the village of Maželiai and a hill near Šaltuona River (Ragauskas 2019:245–246).

One last thing worth mentioning is that there are other hills in Lithuania that bear the name Šatrija. There are 22 such hills in western and central

Lithuania (Vaitkevičius 1998:32; Vaitkevičius 2003:44–45). However, none of these hills possesses a similar level of significance as Šatrija Hill near Luokė. The majority of these other hills, also named Šatrija, are currently unlocated, with their existence known only from documentation from the interwar period. Notably, Šatrija Hill in Žemaičių Kalvarija features in local folklore, specifically the legend of witches “sliding down the hill” (Vaitkevičius 1998:269). Another notable Šatrija Hill, located at Paežeriai, is associated with witches’ meetings (Vaitkevičius 1998:540). Finally, I may mention two more places, both also located in Žemaitija and linked to the Šatrija of Luokė. The first location is a hill known as Raganos Kuprė (“Witch’s Hunch”), situated approximately 35 kilometres south of Šatrija. According to local legend, a witch who resided there used magic ointment to fly to the sabbath at Šatrija Hill (Vaitkevičius 1998:392). The second location is Čerauninkalnis (“Witches’ Hill”), approximately 50 kilometres to the west of Šatrija, where, according to folklore, witches would rest while travelling to the sabbath (Vaitkevičius 1998:259–260).

## Conclusion

Folk legends concerning witches’ sabbaths are profoundly influenced by the demonology and witch trials that characterized the early modern period in Europe. The Lithuanian case is consistent with this broader trend. Witch-hunting was adopted rather late in the Baltics, leading to many similarities to the main themes of other European countries’ folklore. The thematic elements of these legends, such as the preparation for the flight (illustrated by the application of magical ointment to specific body parts), the choice of magical transportation (e.g., brooms, beehives, pestles, bewitched animals or even shapeshifted humans), the activities during the sabbath (e.g., devil worship, drinking, dancing), and the prevalent narrative of the farmhand following witches to the sabbath, all bear striking resemblance to broader European folklore. And while it is still important to analyse and compare this material, the most intriguing thing are the features that make the folk legends in question stand out.

A notable aspect of Lithuanian folk legends concerning witches’ sabbaths is their profound interconnection with the landscape. Witches attend their meetings at a specific place, and the flight to that place is often a very important part of the narrative, which means that the location has to be remote enough for the characters of the story to fly to it. This is probably why some of the most renowned European locations associated with the witches’ sabbath are mythical sites. The villagers who primarily told these stories might have lacked sufficient knowledge of broader geography,

leaving them unable to incorporate actual places in the narrative. However, Lithuanian folk legends concerning the witches' sabbath are predominantly centred on a single location: Šatrija Hill in western Lithuania.

Šatrija Hill could be perceived as a *re-storyed* site, a place whose function and meaning shifted through time. From approximately the second to the thirteenth centuries it was a fortified hillfort with a settlement around it. The earliest testimonies from witchcraft trial cases mentioning Šatrija as the place of the sabbath were recorded in seventeenth century. During witch trials, pagan practices were still widely in use, especially among the villagers, and in many ways a witch represented the opposition between Catholicism and pre-Christian religion. From the early nineteenth century until today, numerous folk legends have been recorded concerning Šatrija. These legends continue the narratives from witches' trials, incorporating new elements, as well as adding a new meaning to the hill with patriotic narratives. We can see from this timeline how different periods of Šatrija's history happened in close succession. This situation facilitated the transition of ideas and meanings, thereby reinforcing the enduring significance of Šatrija. It is worth noting that at some point, at least in folk legends, Šatrija also adopted narratives that are typically associated with important sacred sites of pre-Christian times, such as legends about an underground church or a sleeping army. This reveals another aspect of the same landscape object – Šatrija Hill – and how different meanings often coexist in the same place, making it a multidimensional part of the mental landscape.

Šatrija Hill is the main place for the witches' sabbath in Lithuanian folklore. However, geographical limitations have been observed – the scope of these legends is confined to a radius of approximately 100 kilometres from the hill (with a few exceptions), a phenomenon apparent in witchcraft trial documents as well. According to legends from other regions of Lithuania, witches meet at unidentified hills, bogs, lakesides, or fields, and the few exact locations that are mentioned either in the folk legends or the witch trial records do not seem as prominent. Noteworthy among these locations is Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. It functions as the primary foreign city associated with black magic in Lithuanian folklore, analogous to the role of Wittenberg in the folklore of Western and Northern Europe. Other types of Lithuanian folk legends suggest that Kyiv was believed to contain a school of magic for sorcerers, and in the narrative of the witches' sabbath it acts as the faraway place where witches meet.

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LŽV: *Lietuvių Žemės Vardynas* [Lithuanian Place Name Catalogue], Institute of Lithuanian Language.

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<sup>1</sup> Following international terminology, the term “witches’ sabbath” is employed to refer to this folk legend and the phenomenon itself. It should be noted that the word “sabbath” is never mentioned in the legends themselves. In Lithuania, witches attend “meetings”, “balls”, “parties”, or even “conferences”.

<sup>2</sup> Ninety-nine texts analysed in this research were recorded in 88 different sources from various parts in Lithuania, including archival files from the Lithuanian Folklore Archive as well as published folklore collections by Jonas Basanavičius. The earliest materials include three Lithuanian Scientific Society (LMD) files compiled between 1874 and 1927, representing some of the first systematic efforts to document Lithuanian folklore. Also, five sources are drawn from Basanavičius’ published collections, from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A significant portion of the material (54 Lithuanian Folklore Archive (LTR) files) come from the interwar period (mostly 1927–1939), when folklore collection was organized largely by individuals. Among these, 12 folklore collections were assembled by schoolchildren. From the postwar period (1948–1979), the archive includes 26 files with folk legends about the witches’ sabbath, marking a shift toward more professional collection of folklore in Lithuania. Beginning in the early 1960s, professional folklore expeditions became prevalent, with contributions from leading folklorists such as Norbertas Vėlius, Jurgis Dovydaitis, and others. Some of these later files also include material from student ethnographic expeditions, including those organized by the University of Vilnius.

<sup>3</sup> All folk legends cited in the article underwent a preliminary editing process prior to translation, in order to convey their content to the international reader in the clearest manner possible, without compromising on its integrity.

<sup>4</sup> The number following the letters “LTR” (an abbreviation for Lietuvių Tautosakos Rankraštynas, “Lithuanian Folklore Archive”) serves the purpose of identifying the specific text within the archive.

<sup>5</sup> A total of 70 folk legends have been identified as being based on this particular narrative. Of these, some possess unique variants of the beginning of the story that are worth mentioning: the magical mash has small black snake-like tongues coming out while the witch makes it (LTR 494/38); the witch bathes in a hot tub and then vanishes (LTR 1744/57); the witch hides wings (the kind of wings left un-specified), brushes with them at her armpits, and flies to the sabbath (LTR 3116/1365); the witch or witches plants buckwheat seeds inside the house, they grow, blossom, ripen and die in a few moments,

and the witch uses them for the magical ointment (LTR 792/146; 2641/68; 5058/204).

<sup>6</sup> Memorates are often classified as a distinct category, rather than as a type of folk legend (e.g. Hakamies & Honko 2013:139). For instance, Klintberg (2010) decided to exclude memorates from his catalogue of Swedish folk legends. However, in Lithuanian folkloristics, memorates are considered a type of folk legend, that contains elements of personal experience, while exhibiting plot and narrative features derived from folk tradition (Kazlauskienė 2004). The majority of folk legends concerning the witches' sabbath fall into this category. These legends possess the stylistic features of a memorate, yet the plot of these legends is well established and international. Lauri Honko suggests calling this type of legends, which have the features of both memorates and folk legends, "belief legends" (Hakamies & Honko 2013:141). However, in this article I use the term "memorates", aligning with the established Lithuanian tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Compared to numbers in Western and Central Europe, where around 90 per cent of the people accused of witchcraft were women, in Lithuania only around 60 per cent were women – a situation similar to Latvia, Estonia, and Finland (Zujienė 2015).

<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that in Lithuanian witchcraft trial documents, Šatrija hill is occasionally referred to as "Bald Mountain" as well (Ragauskas 2019). This practice likely comes from the influence of Slavic tradition, and rather written down by the person filling the files, and not by the accusers themselves. There is no record of Šatrija being called "Bald Mountain" in folklore.

<sup>9</sup> Žemaitija (Samogitia in Latin) is a historical, cultural, and ethnographic region of Lithuania, once part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, boasting unique history, traditions and dialect. During the time when Šatrija functioned as a hillfort, Žemaitija engaged in conflicts not only with the Livonian Order but also with the Duchy of Lithuania.